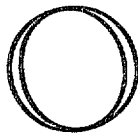


# NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN

By JAMES WALSH

 ONE OF THE most serious and distressing objections to liturgical renewal and, in particular, to the reformed eucharistic liturgy, comes not from anti-vernacularists or from societies for the preservation of the latin mass, but from many devout Catholics who feel that the christian piety they knew, and which sustained their inner life, is fast vanishing. They feel that they were helped and encouraged in their personal union with Christ, in their appreciation for and knowledge of invisible heavenly things, by such devotional practices as the stations of the cross according to the method of St Alphonsus Liguori, by the recitation of the rosary, even at mass, by novenas and benediction of the blessed sacrament; that their own personal and homely devotion to our Lady and the saints, particularly their own patrons, was strengthened by solemn processions, long prayers of invocation, lighted candles and the veneration of relics; and their realization of the eucharistic presence of Christ was helped by frequent visits to the blessed sacrament, by little things like the sanctuary lamp, flowers on the altar, and by the tabernacle having the place of prominence in the church. All these holy things and practices were elements in the external structure of their interior life. What they felt to be particularly valuable in their own personal relationship with Christ was the freedom from distraction, the recollection which they could achieve in the precious moments of quiet prayer at mass; for them, there was a close association between bodily quiet and the divine invitation 'be still and know that I am God'. And now they feel that this time of quiet has been shattered once and for all by the strident call to active participation. It is not that they did not recognize, as they recognize still, that the mass was the lynch-pin of their spiritual living, the essential means to innumerable graces, the whole expression in the concrete of the mystery of their faith. But if they were articulate about it, they would say that their conscious union with Christ in knowledge and in love is not achieved by present participation in the liturgy.

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It is not surprising, therefore, that there are many who see a connection between liturgical renewal and the weakening of the spiritual life as they understand it. The very people, they would say, who are pushing further forward with liturgical innovations, such as taking the mass into the kitchen or into the midst of 'pop groups', are those who decry the old forms of christian piety and ascetical practices, and who spend so much time in achieving the sort of participation they believe desirable that they have neither the leisure nor the inclination for personal prayer.

The force and seriousness of this objection was acknowledged at length in the encyclical of Pius XII on Christian Worship, *Mediator Dei*, which gave such impetus to the liturgical movement at the end of the second world war. The solution offered is one that was entirely satisfactory twenty years ago. Beginning from the truth that 'God cannot be worthily honoured unless mind and will are intent upon spiritual perfection', the encyclical goes on to distinguish between objective and subjective (or personal) devotion. Through the sacramental liturgy, Christ 'is daily active in the work of our salvation, daily purifying the human race and consecrating it to God. The liturgy therefore possesses an "objective" power which truly makes ourselves partakers of the life of Jesus Christ'. But this is not to say that we are entitled to draw the conclusion, as some do, 'that the whole of Christian devotion begins and ends with the mystery of the mystical body of Christ, paying no attention whatever to what they call "personal" or "subjective" devotion'; and the encyclical goes on to say: 'when pious practices, not closely linked with the sacred liturgy, seek only to raise up a man's activity to our heavenly Father, to move him to repentance and salutary and holy fear of God, to withdraw him from the attractions of the world and sin and bring him back to the arduous path that leads to perfection, then they are not only most admirable but quite necessary'.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking, the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective' devotion has its theological roots in the doctrine that the sacramental action is efficacious in itself – that it sanctifies *ex opere operato*. But liturgical development in the Church during the last twenty years has brought with it equal clarification in theological expression concerning the relationship between liturgy and life. The various pronouncements of Pius XII, particularly that which accompanied the reformed Holy Week liturgy and the historic

<sup>1</sup> *Mediator Dei*, 28–34.

allocution to the Liturgical Conference at Assisi in 1957, along with the reform of John XXIII in 1960, have enabled us to see more clearly that objective and subjective devotion are but different manifestations of the same dynamic union with the living Christ; that it would be better to speak of the sacramental life as the effective action of Christ the Redeemer and Saviour in and with his living Church – *ex opere operantis Christi in Ecclesia*, rather than the efficacy of the sacramental action in itself – *ex opere operato*. It may well be that the distinction was stressed twenty years ago more than it is today, because it was considered that large numbers of the faithful were not capable of a proper understanding of the rites and formulas of the liturgy;<sup>1</sup> in other words because it was unintelligible to many. But in our day the dogmatic constitution on the Church has made it clear that as we exist in Christ only as God's people of whom he is the head, so the essential activity of the people – their very life – is their unity expressed in the eucharistic liturgy; nor can we any longer rest content that the liturgy should be intelligible to a chosen few who represent the rest. An act of union among men must involve and engage their intellect and will. A piety that does not find its staple nourishment in the knowledge and love that the liturgy is creating cannot be authentic.

One of the obvious limitations of the older form of christian piety is the lack of awareness of its biblical roots. A proof of this is the customary application of the definition of devotion drawn from the *Summa* of St Thomas Aquinas. Devotion becomes an 'act of the virtue of religion, by which a man is set in his right relation to God, properly directed to him, by which he promptly and willingly devotes himself to all that concerns the worship of God'.<sup>2</sup> We can see how this abstract approach to christian living through the aristotelian categories, wherever there is a lack of biblical understanding, will put all the weight on human effort in worship. The sacraments become simply sources of strength and energy, which, once received, enable a man to draw near to God. Whereas Scripture reveals to us that the one supreme act of devotion is Christ's own dedication of himself from the first moment of the incarnation – 'behold I come to do thy will O my God'<sup>3</sup> – to his last word on the cross: 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit'.<sup>4</sup> This offering of the body of Jesus Christ, 'made once for all'<sup>5</sup> in accordance with

<sup>1</sup> *Mediator Dei*, 115.

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theol.* II-II, q. 82, art. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Heb. 10, 5-9.

<sup>4</sup> Lk 23, 46.

<sup>5</sup> Heb 10, 10.

this divine will which sanctifies us, is the only authentic worship, honour and glory given to God in the new human situation inaugurated by Christ; for 'no man comes to the Father except by me'.<sup>1</sup> Human nature is now capable of true worship only 'through him and with him and in him': 'when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself'.<sup>2</sup> It is only in Christ's priestly worship that our prayer and personal worship become actual. For us, there is only one 'right relation to God': Christ's own human and divine relationship, which he lived during his life on earth; his filial obedience to the Father. In this obedience Christ glorified God and realized supremely the worship of God.<sup>3</sup> By this worship he is glorified.<sup>4</sup> All our worship, then, is achieved in Christ; but it is made actual to us, his Church, upon whom he has conferred his priesthood, wherever, through his spirit, we offer ourselves to him as his people. The effect of our offering is to give us his eternal life;<sup>5</sup> it conforms us, for the Father, to the image of the Son.<sup>6</sup>

The end of all piety and devotion is this being conformed to God's likeness in Christ. It is this progressive conformation that we seek in all our prayers and penance; it is our spiritual life. It is true that this relationship with God in Christ is highly personal and individual; but it is a relationship not only in terms of Christ, but of his whole Body. What holy Scripture emphasizes is that Christ in his human nature did not offer himself for his Father's glory as an individual, but as the head of the human family. He died for all; and by his death all are incorporated into him. Again, it is as a people that we are redeemed, saved, sanctified: 'You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy'.<sup>7</sup> It is only in the Church that we come to exist for him and with him and in him: 'It has pleased God to make men holy and bring them to salvation, not as individuals existing without mutual relationships, but by making them a single people, one which would know him in truth and serve him in holiness'.<sup>8</sup>

Here, then, we see another limitation of christian piety as we have known it in the past, a tendency to preoccupation with one's own

<sup>1</sup> Jn 14, 6.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 12, 32.

<sup>3</sup> Jn 17, 4.

<sup>4</sup> Jn 17, 5-11.

<sup>5</sup> Jn 17, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Rom 8, 29.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Pet 2, 9, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Lumen Gentium, 9.

salvation and holiness – in isolation from the holiness of all God's people. This particular limitation has many ramifications, which are due in large measure to the historical situation in which the old forms of christian piety were developed. The jansenist heresy of the seventeenth century had a much wider influence over the whole of western Europe and the new world than is sometimes realized. It taught that the essential corruption of the human heart is such that man can sin even against his will; and the effect was that, in the minds of many, Christ was separated from his sinful Church. Attendance at mass became an unintelligible duty, since it had no effect in liberating the man in his actual state of sinfulness; all that he could do was to gaze on Christ, raised at the elevation in transcendental holiness, with a desperate hope that somehow he would be saved. Frequent communion was the privilege of those who lived in a purity of life which demanded entire separation from the world. The body of the faithful could never receive communion without a most exhaustive and exhausting sacramental confession.

During this same period in the western Church, many Catholics were suffering from the physical isolation which persecution imposed on them; and this invited them to an affinity with another Christ: the Christ of the past, persecuted, outraged and suffering, but not yet risen. So the Christ of the old christian piety became a divided Christ: despised and rejected by all except those who accepted the same sort of suffering as he had done, with his patience and his endurance; and yet at the same time the Christ far removed in his transcendental holiness, in which his faithful could not share by reason of their abysmal sinfulness.

So Christ in the tabernacle became Christ the prisoner, who in some mysterious way needed his faithful ones as they needed him. In this situation, the distinction between salvation and perfection made good sense. Perfection, holiness, was reserved for religious and clergy; the great body of the faithful was ready to settle for salvation, which meant the avoidance of serious sin as catalogued in detail by the moral theologians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, the majority of the faithful were illiterate and poverty-stricken, deprived of that modicum of culture without which it is not possible to read the Scriptures. There can be no doubt that the main reason for this radical misunderstanding of the christian life, for this distinction between salvation and christian holiness, was ignorance of the Scriptures; ignorance, that is, of the nature and activity of the living Church – and therefore of the liturgy. Salvation

is our union with God in Christ, risen and glorified, through the operation of his holy Spirit. Holiness cannot be defined in any other way than in terms of union with God, present in the mystery of his Word and his Eucharist.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that when Paul speaks of the reality of christian devotion, he begins from the position of our union with Christ suffering: 'with Christ I am nailed to the cross, and yet I am alive; or rather, not I; it is Christ that lives in me. True, I am living, here and now, this mortal life; but my real life is the faith I have in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me'.<sup>2</sup> But the life of which he speaks is the life of Christ, the same yesterday and for ever – of the risen Christ, ascended and established at the Father's right hand, who is at the same time still present in his Church, still surrendering himself in worship to his Father in the midst of the assembly. So it is that by the sacrament of baptism 'a man becomes truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ and is re-born to a sharing of the divine life . . . baptism is thus directed towards a complete profession of faith, a complete incorporation into the system of salvation such as Christ himself willed it to be, and finally towards a complete participation in eucharistic communion'.<sup>3</sup>

Through the liturgy, then, the work of our redemption is achieved.<sup>4</sup> St Peter refers to it as the outcome of loving faith which is the salvation of our souls, the praise, glory and honour given to God in the living recognition that Christ continues to be revealed in the community of believers.<sup>5</sup> The liturgy is the expression in the lives of God's people and the manifestation to the world of the mystery of Christ and the nature of his Church.<sup>6</sup> It builds up all the faithful into the body of Christ, leading them to 'that maturity which is proportioned to the completed growth of Christ'.<sup>7</sup> It re-enacts the passage of Christ through this world to the Father; 'it is the summit towards which all the activity of the Church is directed, and from which all her virtue flows'.<sup>8</sup> Yet even though 'in the liturgy the sanctification of man is manifested by signs perceptible to the senses',<sup>9</sup> it does not of itself signify that all who share the words and gestures of the liturgical rite are thereby assimilated to God in Christ. To utter the great *Amen* loudly and with feeling is not an infallible indication that the perfection of

<sup>1</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 40.    <sup>2</sup> Gal 2, 20, 21.    <sup>3</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Prayer over the offerings for the ninth Sunday after Pentecost.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Pet 1, 6–9.

<sup>6</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Eph 4, 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

union, of likeness, is now achieved. 'Not all who say, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>1</sup> So we are instructed that 'if the sacred liturgy is to produce its full effect, the faithful must come to it with proper dispositions so that their thoughts match their words'.<sup>2</sup> They are to co-operate with the divine life and love which the sacred actions releases; otherwise they will receive it in vain.

The liturgy will certainly express the reality and the full dimensions of the spiritual life if the thoughts of God's people match their words and gestures; if they respond constantly and with all their being to the divine forgiveness and loving reconciliation. Yet the liturgy itself suffers the human limitations of time and place; it cannot hold in its ambit all the living of its spiritual life,<sup>3</sup> which keeps pace with every waking moment of this mortal life. This is indeed the rub: the liturgy, according to the age-old pattern and rhythm of the Church, is celebrated fully, solemnly only weekly – the re-creation of resurrection Sunday. Here, perhaps, we can begin to appreciate the sense of uneasiness which has overtaken those devout christians nurtured according to an older kind of piety, which accepted Sunday mass as a solemn and sacred event, rather than as an intelligible and loving communication of Christ present in his Church. For it has yet to be proved that faith in Christ and conscious union with him has become more luminous, more all-pervading, by the increasing intelligibility of the rites and the growing enthusiasm for participation. The effective proof of Christ's presence – 'that we are dwelling in him and he in us, that he has given us a share of his own Spirit', is the increase of his love in us, to the extent that our lives in the world are like his.<sup>4</sup> As we enter holy week, the Church's first prayer to the Father through Christ is: '... grant that what your people do by word and gesture, they may achieve spiritually with perfect devotion',<sup>5</sup> which is specified as victory over sin and a deep attachment of the heart to the work of salvation. Devotion will manifest itself by the fruits of the Spirit: by that love which Christ showed in the complete giving of himself on our behalf.<sup>6</sup> The worship, the sacrifice and the union which the liturgy portrays is so to affect the mind and heart that Christ's self-despoilment in humility and love will be ours so constantly that we do nothing out of selfishness or self-esteem: 'each of you must have the humility to count others better than himself, and

<sup>1</sup> Mt 7, 21.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Jn 4, 12–17

<sup>5</sup> Prayer of blessing over the palms.

<sup>6</sup> Eph 5, 1–2.

study the welfare of others, not his own'.<sup>1</sup>

This is inward worship, the spiritual sacrifice which God's people outwardly proclaim in the assembly, in their appeal for and confident trust in the loving forgiveness of him who is addressed as *clementissime Pater*. It demands a settled attitude of mind – 'the mind which Christ showed' from the moment of his incarnation to his death on the cross; it is the sacrifice of a humble and contrite heart – the victim lovingly accepted by God in the purification which true contrition and self-surrender effects.<sup>2</sup> It presupposes constant communication in the secret depths of the heart. This is why the christian is not only called to pray with his brethren; 'he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father in secret; indeed, according to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, he should pray without ceasing';<sup>3</sup> and if he is to be, with Christ, pure, holy and stainless in the sacrificial offering, he will 'learn from the same Apostle that we must always carry in our bodies the dying state of Jesus, that the life of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame'.<sup>4</sup>

It is this perfection of inward worship and spiritual sacrifice which was and is the end and object of the old piety, as well as of the reformed liturgy. To maintain, as many writers do today, that the old piety began from and continues in a situation that is basically anti-liturgical, because of its individualistic approach, is an over-facile judgment and a historical distortion damaging to the spirit of the liturgy itself. It is said, for example, that private devotional practices such as meditation (or imaginative contemplation) became, in the hands of counter-reformers such as Ignatius Loyola, the centre of the spiritual life to the extent that the study of the gospels and the affective prayer to which this study leads (the traditional exercise of reading, thinking and praying) supplanted liturgical worship. But such was never the intention. The striving for permanent and conscious union with God in prayer was implicitly understood as the acquiring of the right dispositions for a worthy presence at mass, and fruitful reception of communion; even as the old practice of spiritual communion had as its purpose that union of mind and heart which, as the postcommunion prayer so often proclaims, is the reality which is signified in the sacramental sign. As the old english spiritual writers like Walter Hilton and the author of the *Cloud of*

<sup>1</sup> Phil 2, 3 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf the prayer *In spiritu humilitatis* at the Offertory.

<sup>3</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*



*Unknowing* taught, the highest prayer in secret, the devotion of the contemplative or hermit, will always be accompanied 'by the sense of offering and being offered for the whole Church – and indeed for the whole of mankind';<sup>1</sup> nor should private prayer ever be preferred to the prayer of the Church.<sup>2</sup>

It is true that in the course of the centuries after latin ceased to be the common language of the west, non-liturgical or para-liturgical devotions increased in popularity, whilst the liturgy itself was neglected or was simply 'attended' and became a time of doctrinal instruction or a background for private prayer. It was not these forms of devotion which caused the liturgy to decay. Rather it was the unintelligibility of the liturgy to all except 'learned clerks' and the stagnation of biblical and sacramental theology which led the faithful to express their love for the Redeemer in other ways. In fact, this old piety taught, for the most part, the same practice of prayer and penance which the liturgy itself teaches. The value of liturgical celebration will always depend on its making the mysteries of Christ transparent and communicating them to the assembled faithful in a way that is commensurate with time, place and circumstances of daily living. What is surprising is that the old forms of devotion succeeded in communicating a definite, if inadequate, spirit of prayer and penance which liturgical celebration in the past, because of its unintelligibility, failed to do. We might say that *Mediator Dei*, in approving 'easier ways' of taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice than full and active participation,<sup>3</sup> was admitting to the relative unintelligibility of an unreformed liturgy, when it accepted that devout meditation on the mysteries of Jesus Christ, the performance of other religious exercises and the recitation of prayers other than the liturgical prayers – as long as they were 'in keeping with the latter', were all forms of participation. It would be disastrous if, in this age when such prodigious efforts have been made to make the liturgy intelligible and meaningful, the spirit of inward worship, which the old piety succeeded in communicating, were to deteriorate. And this is a real danger.

It is easy enough to recognize the limitations of the old christian piety, and to stigmatize it as inculcating a penal spirituality: one which, unmindful of the resurrection, tends to remain closed to the fructifying influences of the Spirit. But, at this very moment of

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Cloud of Unknowing* chs. 24–5.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Walter Hilton's *Letter to a hermit*; in *The Way*, Vol VI (July, 1966) pp. 230–241.

<sup>3</sup> *Mediator Dei*, 111–115.

recognition, when we are being rid of the spirit of pessimism and an isolationism which is ultimately sterile, we are faced with a new threat, which is equally opposed to the life-giving Spirit sent by the Father and the Son in the Church to bring us the newness of the risen life of Christ. It is the spirit of discord, which seems to be particularly active in the area of liturgical renewal. As the Council has said: 'it frequently happens, and legitimately so, that some of the faithful will disagree with others on a given matter, and with equal sincerity . . . It is necessary always to try to enlighten one another through honest discussion, preserving mutual charity, and caring above all for the common good'.<sup>1</sup>

The younger generation has taken more easily to the liturgical reforms because it is accustomed to express all its psychological needs by means of dialogue and group activity. This is why it is eminently feasible for younger people to pray 'privately' and to nurture the spirit of inward worship by communicating with one another in spiritual exercises such as biblical services, group meditation and spontaneous prayer aloud, after the pattern of the bidding prayers at mass. And, since they are normally more articulate than their elders, it is for them to explain that such exercises are the equivalent of private devotions of the past; and that both forms of piety are equally acceptable 'as long as they harmonize with the liturgical season, accord with the sacred liturgy, are in some fashion derived from it, and lead the people to it'.<sup>2</sup>

Enlightenment, mutual love, oneness in heart and mind: these are the fruits of the Spirit, which demand the crucifixion of the flesh with its passion and desires.<sup>3</sup> It is union with Christ in his sufferings and true joy with him in his glory which is offered to us as a reality in the liturgy. Each of us has his pentecost, baptism and confirmation; and the risen Christ and his Spirit is present, creating the same pattern in us of life through death which characterized Christ's own human life and mission. The newness of life to which we all rose in baptism is one in which we are to walk daily.<sup>4</sup> The transformation which the liturgy constantly signals is a renewal in the depths of our understanding.<sup>5</sup> Here, at the centre of our personality, in the depths of our heart, we are to be cleansed constantly of our unregenerate selves;<sup>6</sup> so that in the dialectic of asking any receiving, not only from the Father but from each other in Christ, the

<sup>1</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 43.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 13.

<sup>3</sup> Cf Gal 5, 18-24.

<sup>4</sup> Rom 6, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Rom 12, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Postcommunion prayer, Wednesday of Easter week.

loving forgiveness which is the holy sacrifice, we are enlivened by his Spirit 'who himself is the forgiveness of all sins'.<sup>1</sup> He it is who initiates us into the mystery of Christ's journey to the Father in the name of all the redeemed, whom he makes to be of one heart with each other,<sup>2</sup> and daily makes us one in Christ. It is he who pours the gift of divine love into our hearts,<sup>3</sup> and makes possible the command to love; it is by fulfilling this command that we are alive spiritually.

Union with Christ in knowledge and in love must mean that he is present to us and that we are present to him; but this presence is of its nature only imperfectly apprehensible: the liturgy remains the mystery of Christ, intelligible only in the context of faith. Though we are with him and with each other in a new being, knowledge of the being and of the oneness is of a different order from the reflective awareness of ourselves. Normally speaking, it is only by love that we know, that he reveals himself to us: 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him'.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, what we seek and what we desire, the goal of the spiritual life, is to 'come and behold the face of God'.<sup>5</sup> But 'we know that while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith and not by sight'.<sup>6</sup> In our relations with one another, it is so much easier to be brothers in the flesh than in the Lord.<sup>7</sup> The liturgy may teach us that the love of Christ controls us because we are convinced in faith 'that One has died for all; therefore all have died, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised';<sup>8</sup> but we rarely experience all this in the flesh. We are much more aware of living for ourselves, even in the giving of ourselves to each other. The liturgy is the only effective recall of what we owe him in terms of love; and in the liturgy we are empowered to do, in and with him, what he does for all. He assures us that whatever we do for the least of his brethren, we do for him, and that in this way we shall certainly come and see the face of our God. It is in this love, a more than human love, that we are in him and he in us; in this love we teach one another to do what he has commanded. Through this love, which is the life of the Spirit, he is with us all our days; so that, following the truth in love, we grow up in every way into him who is the head.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Postcommunion prayer, Wednesday in Whit week.    <sup>2</sup> Postcommunion prayer – Easter Sunday.    <sup>3</sup> Rom 5, 5.    <sup>4</sup> Jn 14, 21.    <sup>5</sup> Ps 41, 2.    <sup>6</sup> 2 Cor 5, 6–7.  
<sup>7</sup> Cf Phm 16.    <sup>8</sup> 2 Cor 5, 14–15.    <sup>9</sup> Eph 4, 15.